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# Platonic and Attic Laws on Slavery

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Plato called them ἀνδράποδα (human-footed stock) and Aristotle said they were δουλοπρεπής από τη φύση (servile by nature), but most slaves (δουλεία) were once free men and women that quickly found themselves servants in a Greek democracy. Those that served as slaves were often repaying a debt, on the losing side of a war, or considered a slave by birth. In antiquity Athens was a city focused on knowledge and philosophy, yet they found slavery to be an acceptable institution defended by the philosophers themselves. Those that challenged slavery argued more for the unnatural aspects of the master/slave dynamic rather than opposing the institution outright. The question we should ask ourselves is how and why did the ancient Greeks defend the institution of slavery? The Platonic and Attic laws on slavery, Aristotle's notion of the nature of slavery, and the reasons why slavery may have been a rational part of life for ancient Greece are ideas that should be considered.

No one is certain when slavery started in the city-state of Greece, but in his book *Ideas of Slavery* from Aristotle to Augustine, Peter Garnsey makes the claim that chattel slavery began on the island of Chios during the sixth century BC. This initial use of slaves gave rise to slavery as an institution, spreading throughout the empire and affecting everything from Grecian industry to its economy. Whether slavery existed as an extension of Greek civilization from the beginning of the empire or whether it gradually grew into an acceptable practice over the course of time means little when you consider the laws that were established for both slaves and masters.

Laws referring to slavery were highlighted in both the Platonic Laws and the Attic Laws. Both sets of regulations were specific in stating that slaves were considered property of the owner and thus treated as an extension of the household. In his article *Plato and Greek Slavery*, Glenn R. Morrow emphasizes some of the important aspects of Attic law as compared to Platonic law. He shows that slaves had no rights of their own, and they could not seek justice in a court nor could they protect themselves if attacked. Some protection was offered to the slaves through moral and religious law, but the judicial rights of protection were left to the master claiming ownership of the slave.

Morrow continues by distinguishing several important differences between the two sets of laws. The first difference was the punishment of a slave for a crime. Under Athenian law the slave would receive strips equivalent to the fine a freeman would have to pay. Secondly, in the Platonic law a child would be considered a slave when born to one free and one slave parent, but according to the Attic law a child born with one free and one slave parent would often acquire the status of citizen and therefore be considered free. Finally, both laws had different approaches when dealing with the freemen. Men who were emancipated were still held accountable for fulfilling certain obligations to their former masters. Plato allows for no concession here: according to his law, if a slave rejects his obligations, his previous master can reclaim ownership. The Attic law allows a negligent slave to enter into a suit with the former master. If the slave wins he remains free, but should he lose, his emancipation would be void. By referencing the Platonic laws and comparing them to Athenian law we can get a full grasp of the support that Plato offered the institution of slavery. Plato insisted that slaves be kept from leisurely activities and he discouraged the formation of relationships between slaves and their masters. This leads one to believe that he considered slaves to be unworthy of recognition and therefore worthy of only one position in life, that of a servant. His laws seem to set forth justification for the rash treatment of slaves by their masters, whereas men like Aristotle chose to follow a different path in defending slavery.

Aristotle's theory of natural slavery is highlighted in his works, *Politics*. The great philosopher makes a bold, if not flawed, attempt to justify slavery through a concept not unlike natural selection where one species is found to

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be superior to another. He highlights the natural separation of men and differentiates them as Greek (Ελληνικός) and non-Greek (Βάρβαροι), those capable of reasoning and those incapable of reasoning. According to Malcolm Heath, in his article Aristotle on Natural Slavery, Aristotle suggested that, “slaves can be responsive to the reasoned instructions of a master, they have no capacity for reasoning autonomously.” Heath continues with the correlation between non-Greeks (Βάρβαροι) and those that lack rationality (ἀλόγιστοι) by referring to Aristotle’s association of them with non-human animals.

According to Paul Millett’s article Aristotle and Slavery in Athens, Aristotle’s rationalization of natural slavery begins with a definition of slavery which states, “...head of households need to acquire the necessities of life, which include tools, both lifeless and living.” Aristotle emphasizes the importance of slavery by stating in Politics that, “...parts of household management correspond to the persons who compose the household, and a complete household consists of slaves and freemen.” He continues by saying that “...a possession is an instrument for maintaining life. And so, in the arrangement of the family, a slave is a living possession, and property a number of such instruments; and the servant is himself an instrument which takes precedence of all other instruments.”

By definition Aristotle seems to be proclaiming that slaves are necessary tools of the household and thus a justifiable asset to both the master and the master’s estate. As a tool the slave would be used in accordance with the masters’ needs. This meant the slave would be wielded as an instrument of labor to complete work the master would otherwise have done himself. Aristotle viewed the institution of slavery as a natural part of humanity, but this may have been based on the demand for slave labor in ancient Greece.

Greek society grew dependent upon the slave population. Slaves were used to complete domestic, agricultural, and industrial work that Grecians were not inspired to perform. As a result, an economic system developed around slavery and included the sale and purchase of slaves who were captured by war or by piracy. Slavery became so widespread in the city-state that it was not uncommon for the poorer households to own at least one slave. Millett states that those unable to afford a slave were deemed unworthy of holding the position of head of household in Greek society. Grecians fell under the assumption that a well-functioning society had a necessity for slavery. Steven W. Hirsch, in his review of Yvon Garlan’s book Slavery in Ancient Greece, highlights Grecian slave dependency when he writes that chattel slavery was a “necessary element for [Greek society] to affirm its identity.” The city revolved around its use of slave labor and thus slavery as an institution was justifiable in the eyes of the city-state.

In Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology Moses I. Finley attributes the growing standard of life, luxuries, and leisure to the formation of slavery. Grecians are known for a number of attributes including the arts, democracy, science, and luxury, but slavery is typically bypassed as a topic of discussion. Finley points out that, “it was slavery that first made possible the division of labour between agriculture and industry on a considerable scale... Without slavery, no Greek state, no Greek art and science.” It remains to be seen whether or not the entire contribution of the Greek city-state was reliant upon slave labor, but one would be ignorant not to consider the implications here.

The leisure time allotted to Greek citizens was done so with the use of servants. Had it not been for the institutionalization of slavery in ancient Greece the empire may have festered instead of grown in its wisdom. Slaves were often the caretakers of the household and the marketplace. They would manage a place of business while the master or owner was free to pursue other interests, allowing for the creation of art and the advancement of knowledge. Slaves were also the major contributors to industry by working in silver mines which were a source of luxury and finance for the Grecians. Finley claims that the elite managed to block “...the healthy development of an urban middle class of traders and craftsmen, and they thus set the future course of the

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Greek city-state, economically, politically, and ideologically.” The economic, political, and artistic advancements made in Grecian society were done by using slaves as managers and as workers. Slavery became an intricate part of society in Greece, but there were those that stood in opposition to the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle.

Gustave Glotz, in his book *Ancient Greece at Work*, tells us that Athens made no attempts to end slavery as an institution and that Cynics were the largest proponents for the abolition of slavery. One such Cynic, Alcidas, made the statement that, “God created us all free; nature makes no slaves.” When we look deeper into Aristotle’s theory on natural slavery we may get the feeling that he did not support slavery as much as he tried to rationalize its existence. In *Aristotle on Nature and Politics: The Case of Slavery*, Wayne Ambler argues this point by referring to chapter 5 of *Politics* which asks, “Is there any one thus intended by nature to be a slave, and for whom such a condition is expedient and right, or rather is not all slavery a violation of nature?” Ambler emphasizes that Aristotle is questioning the very existence of slaves, thus saying slaves that do not exist cannot be servile by nature.

In truth we find that not only did slavery exist in ancient Greece, but it was also a thriving business. The city-state’s necessity for slavery may have been compounded with its people’s desire for leisure and luxury and therefore was condoned by great philosophers. It is hard to believe that a democratic society could hold others against their will and force them to perform laborious tasks, but slavery as an institution held sway politically and economically in Athens. Plato criticized those masters who were lenient on their slaves and he stressed the need for masters to rule with a firm hand. Aristotle made attempts to justify slavery and legitimize the need to hold men and women as servants in a society that placed freedom above all else. Ultimately, what we find is that Grecians seem to have adopted slavery to suit their personal needs for meaningful lives: ones that lead to breakthroughs in art, science, politics, and philosophy. It is through this need that slavery was found as justifiable.

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